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Library Note

Debate on 3rd April: Environmental Importance of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

This Library Note outlines the origins and development of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It provides a brief summary of the current role and funding of these areas with more detailed coverage of recent evaluations of their environmental importance.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a summary of the key milestones in the development of policy on Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and to present the recent evidence available on their significance in environmental terms. It does not cover perceived threats to AONBs, such as wind farm and road developments.

AONBs include “some of our finest countryside ... [t]hey are living and working landscapes protected by law. They are inhabited by thousands of people and are loved and visited by many thousands more” (Countryside Agency *Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plans: A Guide*, 2001, p. 9). Their primary statutory purpose is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape:

The statutory definition of ‘Natural Beauty’ includes flora, fauna and geological and physiographic features. The natural beauty of AONBs is partly due to nature, and is partly the product of many centuries of human modification of ‘natural’ features. Landscape encompasses everything - ‘natural’ and human - that makes an area distinctive: geology, climate, soil, plants, animals, communities, archaeology, buildings, the people who live in it, past and present, and the perceptions of those who visit it.

AONBs are human-made, cultural landscapes. They are also living landscapes, both by virtue of the species and habitats within them, and because their special qualities can only be maintained by continuing human activity. Very little in the English landscape can be described as ‘natural’, being the result of the combined effects of many centuries of human influence to create the landscape of today. They cannot be frozen in time, they may and will change. What is important is to understand what makes them special, then to develop a vision of how they can be sustained into the future.

(*ibid*, p. 12)

Until 2005 there were 41 AONBs in England and Wales, 37 in England (one straddling the border) and four in Wales. This reduced to 36 AONBs in England following the de-designation of the South Hampshire Coast AONB when the New Forest National Park was established on 1 March 2005. In England the 36 AONBs cover over 2 million hectares or 15% of the total land area. The smallest is the Isles of Scilly (1600 hectares) and the largest is the Cotswolds (204,142 hectares). The South Downs (which includes the Sussex Downs AONB and East Hampshire AONB) has been formally proposed as a National Park but this is subject to a further public inquiry. There are also nine AONBs in Northern Ireland, with a further two proposed. There are 40 National Scenic Areas in Scotland (in many respects equivalent to AONBs) which are designated by Scottish Natural Heritage. Details of the individual AONBs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland can be found on the web site of the National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

2. History and Development of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

The history and development of AONBs are discussed in detail in Chapters 1 and 4 of Edward Holdaway and Gerald Smart *Landscapes at Risk: The Future for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty* (2001). The impetus for the creation of AONBs was linked to an increasing desire by urban populations to access the countryside in the early part

of the 20th Century. This pressure led to a series of inquiries into the creation of National Parks and other protected areas. The authors discuss the reports by John Dower and Sir Arthur Hobhouse which led to the establishment of National Parks and AONBs by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The National Parks Commission was given the power to designate areas as National Parks and AONBs. National Parks were designated for their natural beauty and opportunities for open-air recreation whereas AONBs only for the former. The practical effects of the AONB designation are detailed below:

The 1949 Act gave the then National Parks Commission ... the power to designate AONBs, subject to confirmation by the Secretary of State. The only criteria were that the areas designated should be outside National Parks, and should appear to the designating agency to be of such outstanding natural beauty that the provisions of the 1949 NPAC Act should apply to them.

These provisions were that local planning authorities whose area includes all or part of an AONB should have the power (subject to certain restrictions) to take such actions as appear to them expedient to accomplish the purpose of protecting and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB ... The Environment Act 1995 changed the purpose of 'protecting and enhancing' AONBs to 'conserving and enhancing' but still in regard only to the powers of local authorities. No statutory duties were placed on local authorities actively to manage AONBs in any particular way.

(The Countryside Agency Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plans: A Guide, November 2001, p. 72)

The National Parks Commission was the original statutory body with responsibility for designating and providing guidance on the protection of AONBs. These responsibilities were later transferred to the Countryside Commission (1968), the Countryside Agency (1999) and finally Natural England (2006). Responsibility in Wales from 1990 rested with the Countryside Council for Wales. The Countryside Commission set out the purposes of designation as follows:

- The primary purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty.
- In pursuing the primary purpose account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.
- Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses.

(Countryside Commission AONBs: A Policy Statement, CCP 356, 1991)

In a debate marking the 50th anniversary of the 1949 Act, some of the limitations of the original legislation were outlined by Martin Caton, the MP whose constituency contains the Gower Peninsula, which in 1956 became the first AONB to be designated:

We can still, 50 years later, rejoice in the title of areas of outstanding natural beauty, as it tells us what we are talking about: some of the finest landscape and

most environmentally important countryside in the whole of England and Wales. Although we might quibble about whether the countryside that we are talking about is truly natural, for most people the title communicates very well what we are trying to say...

Unfortunately, it could also be argued that creating the title AONB was almost all the legislation did. The legislation called for designation of parts of our countryside as outstanding, and, in the title, explained why they should be so designated. To be fair, I should add that the Act also made provision for land-use planning arrangements, which, although possibly imperfect, have helped enormously in protecting those special places.

The Act did not provide for the administration of AONBs. It said that they should exist and why, but did not say anything about how--how they were to be managed--or about who was to manage them or to finance that management. That contrasts with the situation of national parks, which were created in the same legislation. Questions of who and how in relation to national parks were answered fairly clearly in the 1949 Act, and were further dealt with in the Environment Act 1995.

The failure to make provision for positive management of AONBs was not an error, but was a result of the thinking of that time--particularly in the Hobhouse committee's 1947 report, which led to the legislation and which stated:

There are many areas of fine country in England and Wales which are not included in our selection of national parks but yet possess outstanding landscape beauty, are often of great scientific interest and in many cases include important holiday areas. While in the main they do not call for the degree of positive management required in National Parks ... their contribution to the wider enjoyment of the countryside is so important that special measures should be taken to preserve their natural beauty and interest.

We recommend, therefore, that the Minister of Town and Country Planning should designate areas of high landscape quality, scientific interest and recreational value as Conservation Areas.

In the 1949 Act, those conservation areas became AONBs. I suspect that, even then, the belief that those areas did not require positive management was mistaken. Consequently, the need for such management has become ever clearer.

(*HC Hansard*, 30th June 1999, cols. 281–282)

In the late 1990's a series of policy developments served to raise the profile of AONBs and highlight the perceived weaknesses in their financial and legislative arrangements. In December 1998 the Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty was launched, primarily representing English and Welsh local authorities with AONBs within their boundaries. In the 1990's a series of reviews were carried out and in 1998 the Countryside Commission submitted advice to the Government setting out their recommendations on the funding and management of AONBs. They recommended "legislation to remedy the defect in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 which gave powers to designate AONBs but which did not make anyone responsible for their management". They further recommended that "local authorities should be statutorily required to pursue the objective for which AONBs were designated and to produce statutory AONB Management Plans" and that "[t]hey should be enabled, where they wish, to discharge that duty through the formal constitution of Conservation

Boards". On the issue of funding, they concluded that the "effective management of AONBs requires increased and secure funding" (Countryside Commission, *Protecting Our Finest Countryside: Advice to Government*, CCP 532, 1998, pp. 24–26).

In relation to planning controls, the Countryside Commission called on the Government to "confirm that the landscape qualities of National Parks and AONBs are equivalent and that equivalent policies for their protection against inappropriate development are in place" and in particular, that they should legislate to "create an explicit statutory obligation on all public bodies ... to have regard to the need to enhance the natural beauty of AONBs" (*ibid*, pp. 13 and 16). A similar study was carried out by the Countryside Council for Wales (*Advice to the Welsh Office on Protected Landscapes in Wales*, 1998). Building on these recommendations, Lord Renton of Mount Harry, the Chairman of the Sussex Downs Conservation Board, introduced the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Bill in April 1999 which sought to enact these recommendations.

3. Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and beyond

These recommendations were subsequently implemented by Part IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000. The main changes introduced were set out in Countryside Agency *Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A Guide for AONB partnership members* (November 2001):

The new legislation in the CRoW Act marks a significant raising of the AONB status and confirms their importance in government policy...

The CRoW Act reaffirms the purposes of AONB designation and confirms the powers of local authorities to take appropriate action to conserve or enhance the natural beauty of AONBs. It also places a new statutory duty on local authorities to prepare and publish a Management Plan for the AONB which sets out their policies for managing the AONB and for carrying out their functions in relation to it. New Plans must be prepared by April 2004 and then reviewed every five years.

There is another important provision that places a duty on all 'relevant authorities' to have regard for the purposes of conserving and enhancing the AONB: 'relevant authorities' includes any public body (e.g. a government department or agency) and any statutory undertaker (e.g. water companies). This part of the Act opens the door to many people and organisations getting involved in AONB management that the AONBs have not always engaged [with] before.

The Act also allows for the Secretary of State to establish, after consultation with local authorities, new management arrangements for AONBs in the form of a 'conservation board'. Conservation boards will not be appropriate for all AONBs but may be needed for the larger, more administratively complex AONBs where there is a range of issues which can best be addressed by an independent body with its own executive powers to act directly. Where these independent bodies have been established, they will carry out the duty to prepare Management Plans and will act to manage the AONB.

(*ibid*, pp. 8–9)

On the issue of planning controls, the document states that:

Planning authorities ... must include policies in development plans that favour the conservation of the natural beauty and character of AONBs. Their development control decisions should follow these policies and provide AONBs with a framework that integrates social, environmental and economic factors to allow for the conservation and enhancement of the AONB in the longer term.

AONB designation is not about stopping development, but it encourages development to be approached with special care. Poorly designed, or located development can spoil the character of an area, but some development can have great social and economic benefits for the community which can further AONB aims in the long term.

In all AONBs major development should be regarded as inconsistent with the aims of development. Schemes for major roads, motorways, large building developments and mineral workings should be avoided. Authorities should also consider the issue of the impact of a number of developments in the long term, or cumulative impacts, and make policies accordingly. Small-scale developments, particularly if they are essential to the needs of the local community, are normally acceptable and should be within, or close to, existing towns and villages and be in sympathy with the character of the area. Good planning in AONBs should look to add value through development and ensure, for example, good design on all new houses.

(*ibid*, pp. 10–11)

The Countryside Agency simultaneously issued guidance on the production and implementation of AONB management plans (*Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plans: A Guide*, November 2001). This document sets out in detail the new funding arrangements for AONBs (see Appendix 2). In summary, the Government, through the Countryside Agency committed to provide 75% of grant aid for core costs and up to a maximum of 50% for other costs (including projects). The Appendix lists sources of external funding streams.

In 2004 new planning guidance was issued for rural areas (*Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas*, August 2004). The sections relevant to protected landscapes can be found in paras. 21–22.

In March 2005 the Government issued new guidance for organisations and public bodies whose activities impact upon protected landscapes (Defra, *Duties on relevant authorities to have regard to the purposes of National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads: Guidance Note*). The Guidance did not introduce any new requirements but aimed to raise awareness and understanding of the existing duties.

In late spring 2005, Defra introduced a three year Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) programme for AONBs, with £3.5m being made available in the first year. The Fund is intended to “support the purposes of AONBs and the delivery of their management plans; support Defra’s objectives of sustainable development, partnership and social inclusion; and support ... Natural England ... in working towards a sustainably managed countryside, improved environment and integrated delivery of rural services” (Defra web site ‘Landscape Protection’).

Guidance on the establishment and operation of Conservation Boards was published by Defra in October 2005 (*AONB Conservation Boards: Departmental Guidance*). In addition to the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the AONB, Conservation Boards must also have regard to increasing the understanding and enjoyment by the public of the AONBs special qualities. However, if there is a conflict between these two purposes, it is to attach greater weight to conserving and enhancing the AONB. The first two Conservation Boards were created in 2004 for the Chilterns and Cotswolds AONBs.

In 2006 the UK ratified the European Landscape Convention, which aims to ensure the proper protection, management and planning of landscapes across Europe and is the “first international agreement specifically addressing landscape issues”. The Government concluded that “the UK already meets the Articles of the Convention so will not need to change existing policy or legislation” (Defra web site ‘Landscape Protection’).

4. Environmental Importance

4.1 Natural England

A variety of sites designated or defined for their importance locally, nationally and internationally in relation to wildlife conservation, habitats and biodiversity exist within AONBs, including Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), National Nature Reserves, local authority nature conservation designations, Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Ramsar sites and biosphere reserves. Natural England has found that AONBs hold significant proportions of the national resource of important habitats, including heathlands (27%), semi-natural grasslands (34%), wetlands (21%) and woodlands (15%). This is “reflected in the distribution of habitats notified as SSSIs” (the nationally important wildlife sites) within AONB. In England, of the approximately 2 million hectares of land which are designated as AONB, just over 264,000 hectares has also been designated as a SSSI (13%). Twenty five percent of the area of SSSI is designated as an AONB. The table below gives an indication of the proportion of SSSI habitats within AONBs.

Habitat	SSSI Area (hectares)	Area of SSSI habitat within AONB (hectares)	% of SSSI habitat area within AONB
Grassland	98836	36088	37%
Heathland	228201	69448	30%
Woodland	116944	27241	23%
Open Water	28693	2450	9%
Wetland	247298	78377	32%
Coastal	299699	44637	15%
All SSSIs	1076986	264601	25%

(Natural England, personal communication)

Natural England have stated that “protected landscapes play a key role in the conservation, enhancement and delivery of the sustainable use and management of England’s natural environment; exemplifying and demonstrating best practice” (‘Natural

England's Draft Policy on Landscape', Paper No. NEB PU08 05, 12th December 2007, para. 4.2) and that they "demonstrate the inextricable links between biodiversity and landscape quality" (Natural England, personal communication).

Natural England have stated that "there is currently no national-level programme specifically for monitoring the landscape condition of National Parks and AONBs" however "common condition indicators are currently being considered" for both National Parks and AONBs. They have assessed the "effectiveness of landscape designation" by using the "condition of designated habitats that contribute to those landscapes" but found that the percentage of SSSIs with an overall condition which was favourable or recovering was 80% in AONBs compared to 82% outside of the Protected Landscapes (Natural England, personal communication).

4.2 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has recently undertaken an assessment of the significance of National Parks and AONBs by comparing the performance of biodiversity within and outside of these protected landscapes. The context for this study is that there has been "no review of the role" of these protected landscapes in "England's system for biodiversity delivery" even though they are of "huge importance for wildlife". They set out the reasons why AONBs are of significance in relation to wildlife:

- Large parts of England's protected area network, e.g. the nationally important wildlife sites or SSSIs, are found in the AONBs
- Important parts of England's semi-natural habitats lie inside the AONBs
- Many of the hotspot areas for targeted action for birds of conservation concern fall in the AONBs. This is true for woodland and farmland birds.

(RSPB, personal communication)

They used two measures of performance. When comparing SSSI condition inside and outside of the AONBs, they "found virtually no difference" between them and noted that "restoring SSSI condition is an element of the new composite Natural Resources Public Service Agreement (PSA) 28, and a key element of any work to conserve and enhance wildlife". The other measure of performance used was the population trends of wild birds. They found that "the bird population trends were very similar within and outside of AONBs. This is true for farmland and woodland species sub-sets. Action in the AONBs has not delivered above national levels towards the targets of halting declines in wild and farmland birds, again part of composite Natural Resources PSA 28". They concluded that:

Our enquiry confirms the significance of the AONBs but suggests that their full potential for wildlife conservation and enhancement is not yet being delivered. The land encompassed by these areas accounts for so much of England's wildlife resource that its contribution has to be a significant element central to achieving England's priorities for biodiversity delivery. A strong mandate, in statute and guidance, underpins the case that more must be done in these most special places. Clearly, this can best be delivered by relevant statutory and non-statutory parties, working together...

Despite many examples of successful and innovative activities for biodiversity in the AONBs, the overall picture is not one of significantly greater performance above the national average. We believe there has to be real potential to explore the ability of those with responsibility for, or interests in, the AONBs to contribute more to meeting England's biodiversity targets.

(*ibid*)

4.3 Countryside Quality Counts

Another recent report has raised the issue of the need for assessment of the performance of AONBs in terms of landscape quality. The Countryside Quality Counts (CQC) project was initiated to provide a systematic assessment and understanding of change in the countryside, taking account of such attributes as biodiversity, tranquillity, heritage and landscape character. One of the policy areas in which such evidence was to be applied was in helping monitor and report on the success of landscape policies for Protected Landscape Areas (PLAs) i.e. National Parks and AONBs; the assessment reported in 2007 (*Tracking Change in the Character of the English Landscape, 1999 to 2003*). The assessment method is applied to Joint Character Areas (JCAs), areas with similar landscape character. These do not coincide with the boundaries of Protected Landscape Areas (PLAs). The report concluded that “at present the CQC results can only be used in an indicative way for those PLAs that either make up a large part of an individual JCA, or which are composed of several JCAs ... the CQC study shows how a national framework for monitoring change within the PLA's could be developed. This might be of relevance if, for example, a Public Service Agreement were to be developed around the idea of ensuring that the landscape quality of these areas was being sustained” (p. 31). The report recommended that action should be taken to initiate such an assessment for PLAs. The headline results for the study showed that of England's 159 Joint Character Areas:

- 10% have been enhanced
- 51% have been maintained
- 20 % are neglected
- 19% are diverging, where new landscape characteristics are emerging

A press release accompanying the publication of the report also stated that “the picture is brighter in some of the best loved and protected areas of England from the Lake District to the Cotswolds. Our National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are included within the top ten per cent of Joint Character Areas where landscape quality has improved since 1998 and 2003, when judged on seven key criteria, from woodland cover to river quality” (Natural England Press Release ‘Traditional landscapes are changing’, 15th June 2007).

4.4 International Union for Conservation of Nature

The discussion above presents the evidence available in England on the importance and effectiveness of AONBs with particular reference to nature conservation. However, there

are a range of other environmental benefits that protected areas provide and some of those identified by Scottish Natural Heritage are outlined below:

...protected areas can play a role as a provider of environmental goods and services. In addition to the protection and management of wildlife, habitats, historic environment and landscapes, many can provide clean water, flood management and carbon sequestration. They can also contribute to the production of traditional food, drink and timber products, as well as providing places to enjoy and recreate in.

Finally, they can be practical examples of sustainable development. Some protected areas are able to pioneer initiatives and develop new, integrated, approaches to sustainable development. For example, the larger areas ... have wide aims, and an integrated focus. However, smaller protected areas can also play a role by developing new thinking and techniques on conservation management, responsible access, public participation, sustainable rural development and community well-being.

(SPICe Briefing 05/08 *Protected Areas*, February 2005, p. 5)

Some of these themes are discussed in more detail in the context of protected areas and landscapes by the IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature; the influential natural resource conservation organisation. The IUCN defines a protected area as “an area of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means.” IUCN categorises protected areas by management objective and has identified six distinct categories, Category V: protected landscapes/seascapes being defined as a “protected area managed mainly for landscape/seascape protection and recreation” (AONBs and National Parks fall within this category). The IUCN web site sets out why protected areas as a whole are important internationally:

Protected areas perform many functions. They are essential for conserving biodiversity, and for delivering vital ecosystem services, such as protecting watersheds and soils and shielding human communities from natural disasters. Many protected areas are important to local communities, especially indigenous peoples who depend for their survival on a sustainable supply of resources from them. They are places for people to get a sense of peace in a busy world - places that invigorate human spirits and challenge the senses. Protected landscapes embody important cultural values; some of them reflect sustainable land use practices. They are important also for research and education, and contribute significantly to local and regional economies, most obviously from tourism. The importance of protected areas is recognized in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Article 8, for example, calls on contracting parties to develop systems of protected areas.

Protected areas face many challenges, such as external threats associated with pollution and climate change, irresponsible tourism, infrastructure development and ever increasing demands for land and water resources. Moreover, many protected areas lack political support and have inadequate financial and other resources.

http://cms.iucn.org/about/union/commissions/wcpa/wcpa_overview/index.cfm

In *Management Guidelines for IUCN Category V Protected Areas: Protected Landscapes/Seascapes* (Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 9, No. 009, 2002) it is noted that the core idea of Category V is the “maintenance of environmental and cultural values where there is a direct interaction between people and nature. The focus of management of Category V areas is not on nature conservation per se, but about guiding human processes so that the area and its resources are protected, managed and capable of evolving in a sustainable way – and natural and cultural values are thereby maintained and enhanced” (p. 10). The report outlines why there has been an increased interest in protected landscapes in a global context and summarises the wide range of benefits that they provide:

...in recent years greater attention has been focused on outstanding, lived-in, working landscapes. This is in large part due to recent, important conceptual and operational advances in conservation in general, and protected areas in particular. Thus, conservation biology has shown the need to work at the ecosystem scale and across the wider landscape, through bio-regional strategies. World-wide, it is now accepted that protected areas can no longer be treated as islands, but must be seen in a larger context ... Also, there is a new understanding of the link between nature and culture: healthy landscapes are shaped by human culture as well as the forces of nature; rich biological diversity often coincides with cultural diversity; and conservation cannot be undertaken without the involvement of those people closest to the resources...

In addition, Category V protected areas ... are also receiving more attention because they:

- are seen as a means of identifying, supporting and promoting sustainable resource use, which is especially valuable where there are storehouses of traditions and tried and well-tested practices that can be drawn upon in using natural resources sustainably...
- are key elements in large-scale conservation programmes known as bio-regional planning, ecosystem management, ecosystem-based management or landscape scale planning...
- can buttress, buffer or support more strictly protected areas...
- can perform a similar role as “building blocks” in biological or ecological Corridors...
- offer scope for the restoration of natural and cultural values as well as for their protection...
- are regarded as a meeting ground between the cultural and natural heritage...
- are a very flexible way of managing an area, capable of taking many different forms according to the local situation...
- often include agricultural systems and other land use practices that depend on, and conserve, a rich genetic heritage of domesticated livestock and crops, whose potential value is increasingly appreciated

(e.g. through the work programme of the Convention on Biological Diversity – CBD); and

- reflect the public's wish ... to have access to a high-quality landscape.

(*ibid*, pp.13–14)

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